

# U.S. SENATOR PATRICK LEAHY

VERMONT

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STATEMENT OF SENATOR PATRICK LEAHY  
OVERSIGHT OF THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT  
AUGUST 2, 1988

Good morning and welcome. We come together at a significant time in the history of the Freedom of Information Act. For the past eight years, this Administration has waged an assault on the FOIA with every weapon in its arsenal -- executive orders, budget cuts, fee guidelines, and legislative proposals clearly designed to gut the FOIA. FOIA requesters have been treated as burdens, and not as the beneficiaries of a statute whose fundamental premise is that American citizens have the right to know about the activities of our government.

The Administration has many complaints about the Freedom of Information Act. Administration officials say it is too time-consuming to respond to requests for information, that it costs too much money to photocopy government records, and that public disclosure of agencies' activities only makes running the federal government more difficult.

These are excuses for government secrecy. And they could be an impenetrable shield to hide failed policies, to hide the waste of public resources and the mismanagement of government operations, or to hide the corruption of public officials -- were it not for our continued efforts to safeguard the Freedom of Information Act.

FOIA was established specifically to deter secrecy in government. It creates a statutory right to request records held by federal agencies. FOIA makes available to each American citizen information to deal with the complexity of government and to understand its actions and purposes.

During its twenty-year history, the Freedom of Information Act has led to the disclosure of much government waste and wrongdoing. It has expanded public knowledge of health, safety and environmental risks. It has been the key to public knowledge of federal contract discrimination, medicare fraud, dangerous consumer products, harmful drugs and unsafe medical devices.

In just the past year, FOIA requests have revealed that the FBI maintained files on distinguished American writers whose work was considered suspicious; that tobacco companies were privately aware of the risks of cigarette smoking, while publicly denying them; that safety problems at NASA were directly linked to poor management; and even that funding for the Contras went to buy volleyball nets and color TVs.

In America we are the beneficiaries of a law that allows all of us to oversee the activities of our government, to pierce the cloak of secrecy, and to obtain the information we need to correct any government abuse. We -- the Congress, the press, and the public -- share this responsibility.

This hearing will provide us all with an opportunity to determine how well this Administration is upholding the Freedom of Information Act.